

Don't Cheat Your Child Out of Childhood Helping Your Child Understand His Emotions

By Christine Belaire, Ph.D.

Have you ever known children who seemed older than they should be? Or children who take on adult responsibilities too early? What about children who “parent” other children or seem to suddenly have problems with things that they previously mastered? Is this healthy? Can children be harmed by growing up too early or by taking on too many adult responsibilities?

Uri Bronfenbrenner, a theorist, wrote that all areas our lives overlap and affected each other. For example, someone may have difficulties at work that stem from problems at home and vice versa. All areas of our lives are intertwined and the core of our lives is the home life. He postulated that problems in our home life can affect all other areas of our lives. Consider the following example.

Sara, age nine, comes to the therapist's office because she is suddenly experiencing high anxiety about going to school. Up until now, she has enjoyed school and has had no trouble separating from her parents. Currently, she is crying and clingy when her parents leave and feels sick throughout the day when left. She complains of stomachaches and headaches. Further, her grades have dropped significantly in the past few weeks. Sara is also experiencing separation anxiety when left by her parents at any time and has withdrawn socially from her friends, which is a marked change in her behavior.

The most logical cause of Sara's behavior seems to be that something is wrong at school (i.e. difficulties with a teacher, being bullied...), which is a valid theory that warrants investigation. However, further discussion reveals that no major changes at school have occurred, but that Sara's parents have recently separated and are highly conflictual in their interactions. Family life is surrounded by arguing, name-calling, side taking, and negative emotions. In addition, Sara states that she does not want to see her father and cries and clings to her mother during exchanges. Once Sara is with her father, she is happy and enjoys her time with her father.

Can trouble at home cause difficulties at school? Are there other factors involved in Sara's behavior? How do we as parents know what is causing difficulties in our children? If there is one common characteristic of parents, it is that we do not want our children to suffer and want to fix whatever is wrong. So, what can we as parents do to recognize and alleviate our children's emotional suffering?

Sara is experiencing what we counselors call “emotional burden.” She has assumed the emotional burden of at least one of her parents if not both. In simple terms, Sara feels obligated to take care of her parents and continually attempts to make them feel better. She may overtly do this by comforting them or by covertly “being extra good” or taking on adult responsibilities such as cleaning the house, taking care of younger siblings, etc.

In this case, Sara appears to be anxious when her parents are away from her and she is attempting behaviors that she knows will reunite her with them. She could be worried that they will not return or that the conflict will escalate when she is absent. Sara has assumed the role of mediator between her parents and thinks that she is responsible for their conflict. To us adults, this sounds irrational; therefore, we should be able to simply explain to Sara why her reasoning is incorrect. However, children are not rational. Their thought processes do not follow a logical, linear pattern, which is how they arrive at conclusions such as “if Daddy can leave then Mommy can leave.” As a result, they experience anxiety that stems from their irrational conclusions. We must consider our behavior and explanations with respect to a child’s perspective. Learning how a child assumes emotional burden and the characteristics of emotional burden will help us understand our children.

Emotional burden can take many forms.

- **Clingy:** You may see a child suddenly become overly clingy to one or both parents or “side” with one parent against the other. For example, in a divorced family, a child may refuse to go with another parent or throw fits before or during exchanges. Two-year-old Andrew, became anxious and clingy to his mother every time his father came to pick him up. Andrew would refuse to leave his mother, who continued to hold him and tell him how much she loves him and would miss him. His father had to pull Andrew off his mother in order to get him into the car. As soon as they began to drive, Andrew stopped crying and happily interacted with his father. Andrew’s father is angry because the exchanges are difficult, and his mother is distraught that Andrew continuously cries.
- **Phobia/illness:** A child may suddenly experience school phobia or develop unusual physical symptoms that would require the parent to be close at hand. Jennifer, a second grader, suddenly began getting stomachaches and headaches at school and will sometimes throw up. As a result, she would call her father to come get her. After she was picked up, her symptoms would improve and she would spend the rest of the day with her father at work. Her father is confused because the doctor can find no physical illness, but Jennifer appears genuinely sick.
- **Caring:** Some children may begin taking care of their parents physically and/or emotionally. Sylvia, age twelve, told of caring for her mother each month when she was sick and of how she (Sylvia) gave her mother her medication and cared for the younger children and household during this time. Sylvia became the surrogate mother for her mother and siblings.
- **Social withdrawal:** Often you may see a child appear to lose interest in age appropriate social activities and friends. This child suddenly prefers to spend most of his time with her parents and refuses to participate in social activities. Tommy, age 10, decides in the middle of the season that he does not want to play baseball or go to his friends houses to play. He says he would rather stay home with his father and help around the house. This behavior is drastically different from his typical active self and has lasted for several weeks.
- **Clamming up:** Children who are bombarded with questions and feel pressured to provide information may begin to limit how much information they provide to

parents. Steven, age fifteen, has stopped having lengthy conversations with his father. His father regularly asks him multiple questions about his time with his mother. Steven has inadvertently given his father information about his mother that resulted in his father being sad and angry. Therefore, he now answers questions with as little information as possible and does not initiate conversations that may involve his mother. Steven's father does not know why the change has occurred.

- **Withdrawal from parents:** If a child feels caught in the middle of two parents, she may choose to isolate herself and withdraw from both parents. Linda, age 16, is increasingly staying by herself when home and finding any excuse to be away from home. She does not want to be with either of her parents especially if she thinks they will want to discuss their marital issues. Linda is pulling farther and farther away and her parents are concerned that her behavior may be more than normal teenage independence.
- **Imitating behavior:** Children who are aligned with one parent against another will often imitate the behavior and/or words of one parent towards other. As a result of a separation, Will was residing primarily with his mother and infrequently spent time with his father. During the course of a child custody evaluation, Will described his mother using derogatory phrases that mimicked those his father said about her. In addition, Will began to verbally degrade his mother at home in the same pattern that his father did. Will's father believes that Will is finally seeing the truth about his mother, and his mother worries that Will is becoming an abuser.
- **Manipulating:** All children when given a chance will attempt to manipulate a situation to their advantage. However, children with emotional burden are sometimes forced to become manipulative when they caught in the middle of their parent's conflict. Lisa, age 7, is forced to choose between accepting an outfit that her mother bought for her or refusing it because her father has told her that he believes that type of outfit to be inappropriate. Lisa has no viable solution that will prevent her from disappointing a parent. She will, therefore, attempt to please both parents and become a chameleon. Her parents argue about who is correct with respect to Lisa's wishes because she tells them both exactly what they want to hear.
- **Academic problems:** Anytime a child's grades drop suddenly, it is a sign that something is happening with that child. The problem could range from something as simple as a crush that is distracting the child to emotional stress. A drastic change in academic functioning should warrant attention from parents. Tom, a seventh grader, is typically an A-B student who makes an occasional C. However, during the last term after his parent's separated, Tom's grades have dropped to C's, and D's, and F's. Tom is spending more time studying, but his grades continue to drop. Tom's parents are concerned that he may have ADHD. An evaluation reveals that he is worried about his parents and the separation.

When they are assuming emotional burden, children may exhibit several characteristics. Children are inherently connected with both of their parents and need to be emotionally close with both parents. This need to be connected to their parents contributes to a

child's tendency to accept emotional burden. The child wants to please and will assume the emotions of adults when adults unintentionally place the burden on them. In addition, children will assume emotional burden even when their parents are trying to shelter them from that burden. Children will often take it upon themselves to take care of others or worry about problems. It may seem as if an older child who is caring for the needs of younger siblings while mom and dad are arguing is simply being helpful, but parents who are overburdened by their own emotions may not recognize that the child is inappropriately assuming their emotional burden.

Children with a "caretaker personality" are more prone to assuming emotional burden because it is in their nature to nurture. Further, they tend to connect their own self-concept with the care of others; therefore, when an opportunity arises to reduce negative emotions in a family by assuming those emotions, these children will typically step up. Similarly, the eldest child may be more prone to care for the needs of younger siblings and become a "pseudo parent." It is important to recognize the difference between a child having more physical responsibility for chores due to age and a child who thinks it is his sole responsibility to provide for the emotional needs of other children or adults. In the latter, the child is assuming adult responsibilities that he is incapable of fully handling physically or emotionally. Often in families with multiple children, one or more of the children will "side" with one parent over another. In a divorced family with two children, it is common to see children split their allegiance with each child "choosing" a parent. One child interviewed stated, "Daddy has no one else. I need to be with him. Mom has my sister." The parents in this case report feeling hurt or betrayed by their children without recognizing the child's emotional struggles. A family with more than two children may find either clusters of children "siding" with a parent or one or more children who withdraw from both parents. Siding with a parent is more of an indication of emotional burden on the child than it is an indication of a strained relationship with that parent (although that is a possibility).

When emotional burden is placed on children by parents, children report feelings of guilt, feeling trapped, and confused about how to respond to their parents. Further, they report that they do not understand how they get into troubling situations where they are forced to choose or how to avoid those situations in the future. Children who assume emotional burden think that they are bad if they cannot help their parents. Remember that children's thought processes are not fully rational and, therefore, don't make sense to us adults.

It is important to note that having one or even a few of these characteristics does not mean that a child is suffering from emotional burden; however, it does suggest that parents should assess whether or not a problem exists. Symptoms indicate that a problem might exist and that parents need to pay attention to potential stressors in the child's life. There is not a magic formula that determines which symptoms are linked with which problems. Each child will react uniquely to each situation. The key is to notice changes in your child. Further, some of the characteristics mentioned may be due to a normal developmental phase. For example, a toddler experiencing separation anxiety or a teenager spending more time with friends rather than parents may be due to the normal

pattern of development. Combinations of symptoms or in conjunction with other behaviors will provide more information in determining if the child's behavior is problematic. In addition, considering individual personality differences is important when determining whether or not a characteristic is problematic. Characteristics in one child may indicate a problem with emotional burden and not with another child in the same family.

Similarly, parents display particular characteristics when they place emotional burden on children. Parents do not intentionally place their emotional burden on their children. They do not realize that their behavior is causing harm to their children. There are a few parents in this world who intentionally harm their children, but most parents are doing the best they know how and simply do not realize that sometimes they place emotional burden on their children. Good parents sometimes make these mistakes simply because they don't know it's harmful. When parents are overwhelmed by their own emotions and do not have appropriate outlets for dealing with those emotions, children may get caught in the crossfire. It is at this point that a parent may depend on a child for emotional support. Children are still learning about their own emotions and rely on the stability of adults for their well-being. As a result, they are not capable of handling adult emotions and attempting to handle adult emotions adds more stress to their lives. Sometimes, parents (particularly single parents) rely on children for physical support. When family structure changes, everyone learns new roles including children who may gain more chores. However, when children become solely responsible for tasks such as balancing the checkbook, cooking dinner, cleaning house, and caring for siblings they become the pseudo adult in the family. There needs to be a balance between providing a child with appropriate responsibilities and overburdening him with adult responsibilities. Sometimes parents mistakenly assume that children are capable of handling more than they actually are. As children grow, they need more responsibilities, but they should be age appropriate responsibilities that allow a child to learn rather than overburden the child.

In highly conflictual situations, parents may become so focused each other that no one is focused on the child. It is in these situations that parents place children in the middle of the conflict, which overburdens the children. These children have problematic symptoms that are overlooked because one or both parents are consumed with conflict. For example, Tayna's parents were so consumed with their conflict with each other and fought about details of her medical treatment that her condition went untreated. Both parents were more concerned with being right and winning than with caring for the needs of their child. Often, once a parent realizes that the child's needs were overlooked, that parent may overcompensate because of feelings of guilt or regret. As a result, a child can manipulate that parent. When a parent is overcompensating for a mistake, he or she can produce anxiety when attempting to relieve anxiety. Children need continuity and shifting toward either extreme can be stressful for children.

Now that we recognize emotional burden in both children and parents, what do we do to stop it? The most important thing you can do is recognize and deal with your own

emotions and stress. When we effectively deal with our own issues, we are better able to parent. Further, we adults are responsible for teaching our children how to deal with the stress of life, but if we don't know how to deal with our own issues, we cannot teach our children to be successful. Following are some tips to dealing with your emotional stress.

- Identify and acknowledge your emotions and sources of stress
- Seek adult support from friends or family
- Seek professional counseling
- Keep a journal
- Exercise
- Find a relaxing activity

An equally important step to alleviate emotional burden is to stop children from assuming emotional stress. A child's tendency is to assume the burden, but a parent's responsibility is to prevent the child from assuming that burden. Begin by recognizing the characteristics. If you think that your child is assuming emotional burden, clearly express to your child that you appreciate the child's effort, but that you can handle the adult responsibility yourself. An appropriate statement is, "That is for grown-ups to worry about. Mommy and Daddy will take care of that." Setting the appropriate boundaries for your child will provide security and allow your child to continue with childhood rather than to grow up too soon and experience adult emotions when he is unable to do so effectively.

As problems arise with your children, you want to begin to investigate the cause remembering that it may not be the most obvious answer. Often the root of many kids' problems lie in emotional burden that they are experiencing. As parents, our job is to teach our children to thrive in this world while simultaneously protecting them. Sometimes during this process, we inadvertently place emotional burdens on them. When this happens, (and it happens to all parents) don't spend your time feeling guilty because feeling guilty does not solve any problem. Spend your time helping your child learn how to appropriately handle his emotions and learn to understand your own emotions and deal with them so that your children can enjoy childhood and not be overburdened by adult emotions.